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Effects of the Malaysian Travel Destination Brand Image on Tourist Satisfaction and Destination Loyalty

¹Mahadzirah Mohamad, ¹Nor Azman Mat Ali, ¹Nur Izzati Ab Ghani,
²Mutia Sobihah Abd Halim and ¹Nanthakumar Loganathan

¹Faculty of Economic and Sciences Management Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin,
Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia

²Faculty of Applied Social Sciences Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia

Abstract: The main aim of this research was to ascertain the image of Malaysia as a travel destination among European Tourists. The approach used in the study was to develop destination loyalty, satisfaction and destination image structural models for first-time and repeat-visit tourists. Tourist satisfaction was treated as the mediating construct. The data was collected using survey method. Structural equation modelling (SEM) technique was employed to investigate the relationships amongst the constructs in the proposed theoretical framework. The findings of the study suggested that destination image and tourist satisfaction influenced destination loyalty for both first-time and repeat-visit tourists. Tourist satisfaction was empirically proven to have a full mediating effect on the relationship between destination image and loyalty for the both groups of tourists. The study proposed that the image of nature-based tourism should become the major selling point of Malaysia as a travel destination.

Key words: Destination loyalty • Destination image • Tourist satisfaction • Bootstrapping

INTRODUCTION

The importance of examining customer loyalty is widely recognised and appropriately researched but lack of emphasis has been given on this aspect in the travel and tourism context [1]. It was proposed that more studies were required in terms of examining the role of destination image and customer satisfaction on destination loyalty [2] especially in the case of Malaysia. These studies are deemed to be of assistance, especially in making decisions pertaining to the strategic marketing planning of tourism destinations. In a competitive global travel and tourism environment, a destination has to stand out from its other competing travel destinations. Treating a travel destination like any other “products” sold in the market place, the competitive unique features of a destination that become the distinctive selling propositions should be conveyed to the potential visitors to influence their awareness, preferences, intention to travel and ultimately resolve in travelling to the destination. Effective destination marketing promotional strategy should have an outstanding strong selling proposition that is able to

attract tourists’ attentions by creating an image that stands out amongst the clutter of other competing destination images that would eventually arouse interests, generate desire to travel to the destination and eventually lead to taking to travel to the destination. In addition, delivering offerings as expected by the tourists created through the promoted destination brand image is equally important to ensure tourist destination loyalty. Therefore, measuring tourists’ satisfaction is also of paramount importance to determine aspects that are not meeting tourists’ expectation for improvement.

The Destination Management Office (DMO) of a host country usually devote an enormous amount of effort and resource by undertaking destination marketing activities in its attempt to attract tourists to visit the country. Strong brand image should not emerge without prior planning and should be based on thorough underlying works of ascertaining the correct image to be put forward that would attract the potential tourists. The planning of the destination marketing activities should be underpinned by the outcomes of tourists’ preferences for visiting any particular destination. Thus, the most initial

Corresponding Author: Mahadzirah Mohamad, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, 21300 Kuala Terengganu, Terengganu, Malaysia.
Tel: +609-6688485, E-mail: mahadzirahmd@unisza.edu.my.

crucial step is to ascertain the target tourists' expectations to travel to a particular destination. This is to ensure that the right message, promising the offerings of a destination, was delivered to the right segment of tourist market meeting their specific requirements. In the context of the travel and tourism market, brand image is not only limited to just a logo or graphic elements but it could also include other elements such as words or taglines used in the marketing promotional campaign that affected the tourists' perception of a destination offerings. The established brand image by a travel destination would convey to tourists the type of travel experiences in store for them when they visited the destination.

Tourist satisfaction is as a result of not only meeting but exceeding tourist expectations [3]. In planning marketable tourism products and services, it is noted that the study of tourist satisfaction was crucial for a successful travel destination business [4, 5]. Moreover, tourist satisfaction was a good predictor of destination loyalty [6, 7]. Most of the time, destination loyalty was the reason tourists choose one comparable travel destination over another and retained it as their first choice travel destination. The importance of attaining destination loyalty should not be overlooked as it is widely accepted as the fundamental marketing concept that affects corporate performance [8]. It was reported that an increase of 5% in customer retention would generate 85% more profits in service industry [9]. Moreover, loyal tourists would usually make repeat visits and would prefer the destination more than others. Although there are cases where loyal customers may not visit the same travel destination because of other factors, such as age and time constraints, they are most likely to engage in spreading positive word-of-mouth by telling friends and family about the destination. Image and customer loyalty are antecedents of destination loyalty [10]. Therefore, the objective of this study is three fold: (1) to determine if there is a distinctive profile that differentiate first-time from repeat-visit tourists; (2) to ascertain the type of destination brand image that could attract European tourists to visit Malaysia; (3) to ascertain the extent to which tourist satisfaction affects the relationship between destination image and destination loyalty.

Literature Review

Destination Loyalty: Destination loyalty is described as the whole feeling and attitude that encourage tourists to revisit the same destination as well as recommend the destination to other people [11, 12]. Studying destination loyalty would enable DMO to gain insights relating to customers' needs and wants in order to maintain repeat

tourists of particular destination brands [13]. Another benefit of destination marketing is a free promotional destination marketing campaign through the spreading of positive word-of-mouth by loyal tourists [14]. Customer loyalty is conceptualised as consisting of behavioural, attitudinal and composite loyalty [15]. The behavioural approach is reflected through the repeat purchase of a brand over time by a consumer [10] or respondents' intention to revisit [15]. Attitudinal loyalty is the level of customer's psychological attachment and attitudinal encouragement towards the travel destination, usually manifested through items such as recommendation of the travel destination to others, dissemination of positive word-of-mouth and assurance to a preferred destination [17]. Both behavioural and attitudinal loyalty are useful in understanding customer long-term relationship [18] and composite loyalty, which integrates behavioural and attitudinal loyalty, was used to capture and explain comprehensively the construct in this study.

Tourist Satisfaction: Tourist satisfaction is a construct that defines overall evaluation of tourists about their experiences towards a certain travel destination [19]. Attaining tourist satisfaction is no doubt important to ensure the success of any business venture mainly because satisfied customers are most likely to engage in providing a free marketing campaign through spreading positive word-of-mouth and making recommendation to families and friends to visit the destination. Secondly, satisfied tourists act as a buffer against competitors. Their satisfactory experiences visiting a travel destination would create repeat visitations and in some cases they would not mind paying more for the similar service offerings by competitors ensuring a steady cash in-flow to the country. Thirdly, it is easier to handle repeat-visit satisfied tourists compared to the first-time tourists or unsatisfactory tourists [20]. Repeat-visit tourists have had the experiences visiting the travel destination and they are more independent and have more potential to explore the destination than the first-time tourists and it is easier to satisfy them compared to the latter. Unsatisfied tourists are expensive because of the service recovery efforts undertaken to restore their satisfactions, such as compensations payment [21]. If their bad travel experiences were not resolved satisfactory or handled properly it would not only create a bad destination brand image but they would spread negative word-of-mouth to others which would not support the destination marketing campaign of a travel destination or negatively affect the destination brand image.

Measuring tourist satisfaction is established through the characteristic of tourism offers because tourists may not be satisfied with the whole destination, while being satisfied with the individual attributes of the destination [22, 23]. The specific attributes of a destination would eventually influenced the overall tourist satisfaction [24] and the understanding of these attributes would help DMO to ascertain which aspects of the destination are more favourable than the others [23].

Destination Image: The importance of ascertaining tourists' perception of a destination image should not be underestimated since it is argued to be an important determinant factor that influences tourists selecting a destination [25]. Investigating the image enclosed in the minds of tourists would help the DMO to reveal the most representative specific objects and descriptors of a destination which have great marketing potential in attracting tourists visiting the destination [26]. Moreover, studying destination image can contribute to the understanding of tourist behaviour [27, 28] especially in the process of selecting a destination [29]. Interestingly, different researchers define destination image differently and usually it is context-specific embracing the unique characteristics of the particular travel destination [30]. Nadeau *et al.* [31] provide a general definition of destination image which defined it as tourists' perceptions of a destination. Others defined destination image as the sum of beliefs, attitudes and impressions that individuals or groups hold towards tourist destinations or some aspects of destination [32, 33].

There are two approaches used to measure destination image. The first one is cognitive-affective approach and the second one is functional-psychological approach. This study used functional-psychological measurement to measure destination image developed by Echtner and Ritchie [27] which consists of three components: functional-psychological, attribute-holistic and common-unique. Along the functional/psychological continuum, functional characteristics are more concerned with tangible aspects of the destination because they are directly observable or measurable, while psychological characteristics are intangible aspects because they are more difficult to measure or observe. The second continuum, attribute-holistic line reacted to the fact that destination image should include the perceptions of individuals attributes such as accommodation facilities, friendliness of the people and climate, etc. plus holistic impression such as mental picture or the imagery of the

destination. The third continuum, the common-unique component, catered to the inspiration of individuals from perceptions based on common characteristics to those based on unique features or aura.

According to Zhu [5], a study on destination image is very important as it is believed and widely known to have strong effects on tourist satisfaction. Tourist satisfaction will improve if the destination has a positive image [34]. Recently, a study by Mahasuweerachai and Qu [35] in the tourism industry discovered that destination image has positive impacts on destination loyalty. This shows that the more preferable the image of a destination, the more likely tourists will become loyal to the destination or likely to return to the same destination [36].

Brand is a logo, slogan, text, or a design that separates a company or product from its competitors. In addition brand attracts customers and retains existing customers [37]. Image is defined as the sum of beliefs, attitudes and impressions that individuals or groups hold towards an organisation, product or services. Image also can be defined as the "perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory" [38]. By definition, destination images and destination brand associations are essentially two sides of the same coin [39].

Data Source and Methods

Target Population: The target population in this study is European tourists who have visited Malaysia for a holiday, business trip, conference, visiting friends or relatives for at least one day but less than one year [40]. European tourists were chosen as the target respondents in this study based on two indicators proposed by the Kuala Lumpur structure plan 2020, namely tourist arrival and average length of stay. Europeans scored the highest range of tourist arrivals and average length of stay compared to other regions namely Americas, Oceania, Asia and Africa.

The Design of the Questionnaire: The structured questionnaire in this study consists of four sections. The first section of the questionnaire is to measure destination image. This section was adapted from the work of Echtner and Ritchie [41] which consists of 72 items. After conducting a pilot test, only 31 items were used to measure destination image for the actual survey using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 as highly disagree to 7 as highly agree. The second section in the

questionnaire is tourist satisfaction. The items to measure tourist satisfaction were adapted from the work of Chi [28] which consists of 17 items using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 as highly unsatisfied to 7 as highly satisfied. However, after conducting a pilot test, only 9 items were retained for the actual survey. The third section of the questionnaire is destination loyalty. The items used to measure destination loyalty have been referred from the work of Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman [42]. A 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 as “not at all likely” to 7 as “extremely likely” was applied to measure destination loyalty.

The last section of the questionnaire is designed to get information of the respondents such as country of residence, gender, marital status, age and purpose of visiting Malaysia. Before the questionnaire was distributed to the respondents, content validity was ascertained to ensure how well the dimensions and elements of a concept have been explained [43]. In this case, two academicians were involved in reviewing the questionnaire. Then, a pre-test was conducted involving 10 respondents to ensure the instruments could be understood by the actual respondents [43]. After conducting a pretest, pilot testing was performed among 100 international tourists that have similar background with the actual respondents at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA).

Data Collection Procedures and Sampling Plan: The data collection of the actual study was conducted at Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) among the European tourists. The purpose of choosing Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) as the place to collect data is because it is the major entry and departure point of the international tourists who visit Malaysia. The sample size for this study was determined using the confidence interval method as it is theoretically the most correct method used by marketing researchers and national opinion-polling companies [44]. Using confidence interval method with p (estimates percent in the population = 50%), q ($100 - p$) = 50% and e (acceptable sample error expressed as a percent) between $\pm 5\%$ and $\pm 10\%$ at 95% level of confidence, the calculated sample size (n) is between 96 and 384 as recommended by Burn and Bush [44].

The questionnaires were distributed to the respondents while they were at the departure gates waiting to board the aeroplanes. A total of 820 respondents answered the questionnaire. A sampling

frame was created based on the total of 820 returned questionnaires since accurate data for the size of the target population for this study was not available [44]. A simple random sampling was chosen to select the study sample from the created sampling frame. The purpose of choosing simple random sampling is because it can reduce the potential human bias in the selection of cases to be included in the sample [45]. Hence, Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) software was used to select the respondents by “Random Sample of Cases” and only 420 were selected as the sample size in this study. Out of these 420 cases, after operating a data-cleaning process through deleting missing items and outliers, only 251 respondents (within the recommended range of 96 and 384) were subjected for further analysis.

Data Analysis Procedures: There were several statistical analyses used in this study namely descriptive statistic, exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis, reliability and validity analysis and structural equation modelling. Descriptive analysis was used to examine the background of respondents. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was used to reduce the items of destination image, tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty. After conducting EFA, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was applied to confirm the measurement model derived by EFA [46]. Two criteria of reliability were applied in this study, namely internal reliability and construct reliability (CR). Internal reliability was applied to items measuring destination image, tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty to establish that these items were free from random error or without bias based on Cronbach’ Alpha value [47]. Hair *et al.* [46] recommended that the value of alpha coefficient that is equal to greater than 0.7 is generally considered to be acceptable. CR was used to measure reliability and internal consistency of the measured variables and a CR value of 0.7 or higher suggests good reliability [46].

Validity of the instrument was ascertained through three types of validity tests: convergent validity, construct validity and discriminant validity. Convergent validity, measuring the extent to which a set of measured items reflect the theoretical latent construct those items are design to measure [46] was assessed based on the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) value. An AVE of 0.5 or higher is a good rule of thumb suggesting adequate convergence [46]. Construct validity was assessed using several acceptable fitness indexes: normed chi-square (χ^2/df), Goodness-of-fit Index (GFI), Comparative Fit

Index (CFI), Tucker Lewis Index (TLI) and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). Discriminant validity is achieved when the values of square root of AVE is higher than the value of correlation between the respective constructs [48]. Structural equation model (SEM) was applied to test the relationships among destination image, tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty and test the proposed hypotheses. The bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals, considered the best in testing for mediation [49], was performed to test the mediation role of tourist satisfaction.

RESULTS

Profile of Respondents: The data illustrated in Table 1 suggests that almost 57 per cent of the respondents were first-time tourists and 43 per cent were repeat-visit tourists. Majority of the respondents for both first-time and repeat-visit tourists were male, single, aged between 20 to 39 years old and they visited Malaysia for a holiday. Majority of the respondents for both groups were from Northern and Western Europe. However, the data in Figure 1 also suggests that majority of the first-time tourists came from Western Europe (Netherlands, Germany, France, Switzerland, Belgium, Austria and Holland) and repeat-visit tourist originated from Northern Europe (United Kingdom, Ireland, Denmark, Scotland, Norway and Finland). The grouping of countries into Western Europe and Northern Europe was based on <http://www.mapsofworld.com/europe/>.

Reliability and Validity: Generally, the value of Cronbach's alpha coefficient (α) greater than 0.70 is acceptable to indicate that the measurement for Destination Image, Satisfaction and Destination Loyalty achieved internal consistency as illustrated in Table 2, Table 3 and Table 4 respectively. In addition, construct reliability (CR) was also assessed to ascertain the reliability of these measurement models. Table 2, Table 3 and Table 4 indicated that the calculated values of construct reliability (CR) ranging from 0.80 to 0.89 exceeded the critical value of 0.7. Validity was assessed through convergent validity, construct validity and discriminant validity tests. Convergent validity was assessed using average variance extracted (AVE) and the scores are as indicated in Table 2, Table 3 and Table 4, exhibiting values ranging from 0.51 to 0.73, surpassing the recommended level of 0.50, suggesting that the convergent validity of these measurement models are satisfied.

Table 5 and Table 6 illustrate the results of discriminant validity for first-time and repeat-visit tourists respectively. The results show that all these constructs met this test, with none of the correlations surpassing the respective squared AVE values. The fitness indexes used to assess construct validity of the models are illustrated in Table 7. The values of these indexes met the required level of acceptance suggesting that these models achieved construct validity requirements. Therefore, the above tests supported that the measurement models for Destination Image, Tourist Satisfaction (measured through two underlying factors: facilities and accessibilities and cultural festival events) and Destination Loyalty have established adequate reliability and validity.

Malaysian Destination Image Perceived by European Tourists and Their Satisfaction: Referring to Table 2, it is interesting to note that both groups of tourists perceived Malaysia as a destination that offers the chance to see wild life and has scenic beauty. In addition, first-time visitors perceived a holiday in Malaysia as a real adventure. Among repeat-visit tourist, apart from perceiving Malaysia as a destination that offers the chance to see wild life and scenic beauty, they also perceived Malaysia as having many interesting places to visit and nice beaches for swimming. Obviously, these findings are supported by the fact that the knowledge of repeat-visit tourists about Malaysia was advanced compared to first-time tourists as a result of their previous visits to Malaysia. The independent t-test was subjected to ascertain whether there is a significant difference of image perception between first-time and repeat-visit tourists. Results of the independent t-test ($t=0.275$, $p=0.78$) suggest that there is no significant difference between the two groups. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that both first-time and repeat-visit tourists perceived Malaysia as providing nature-based tourism.

As illustrated in Table 3, Figure 1 and Figure 2, the overall experiences of both first-time and repeat-visit tourists visiting to Malaysia was manifested by two underlying satisfaction factors labelled as "facilities and accessibilities" and "cultural festival events". Results of the independent t-test ($t=0.454$, $p=0.65$) suggest that there is no significant difference in satisfaction between the two groups.

As illustrated in Table 4, it is interesting to note that both groups of tourists seem to agree that they would engage in saying positive things about Malaysia to other people and encourage friends and relatives to visit

Table 1: Profile of First-time and Repeat-visit Tourists

Variables	First-time tourists (%) (n = 143)	Repeat-visit tourists (%) (n = 108)
Country of Origin:		
Northern Europe	42.7	54.3
Western Europe	50.3	39.0
Eastern Europe	2.1	2.9
Southern Europe	4.9	3.8
Gender:		
Male	59.4	64.8
Female	40.6	35.2
Marital Status:		
Single	39.9	37.5
Married	27.3	15.4
Living with partner	30.8	37.5
Others	2.1	9.7
Age:		
Below 20	2.1	1.0
20 – 29	50.0	27.9
30 – 39	32.4	26.0
40 – 49	7.7	17.3
50 – 59	2.8	19.2
60 above	4.9	8.7
Purpose of Visit:		
Holiday	88.1	72.4
Business Trip	7.0	16.2
Visiting Friends	0.0	3.8
Visiting Relatives	0.0	4.8
Other (please specify)	4.9	2.9

Table 2: Psychometric Properties of the Destination Image Measurement Model For First-time and Repeat-visit Tourists

Items	First-time Tourist				Repeat-visit Tourist			
	Loading	A	AVE	CR	Loading	α	AVE	CR
Destination Image:	na	0.75	0.54	0.77	na	0.84	0.58	0.85
There are many places of interest to visit in Malaysia (D61)	na	Na	na	na	0.50	na	na	na
Malaysia has nice beaches for swimming (D42)	na	Na	na	na	0.69	na	na	na
A holiday in Malaysia is a real adventure (D20)	0.61	Na	na	na	na	na	na	na
Malaysia offers the chance to see wild life (D38)	0.82	Na	na	na	0.83	na	na	na
Malaysia offers a lot in term of scenic beauty (D46)	0.75	Na	na	na	0.81	na	na	na

Note: CR=Composite Reliability, AVE=Average Variance Extracted

Table 3: Psychometric Properties of the Tourist Satisfaction Measurement Model for First-time and Repeat-visit Tourists

Items	First-time Tourist				Repeat-visit Tourist			
	Loading	A	AVE	CR	Loading	α	AVE	CR
Facilities and accessibilities	na	0.80	0.59	0.81	na	0.73	0.51	0.75
Transportation in Malaysia (S4)	0.75	Na	na	na	0.69	na	na	na
Moving around in Malaysia (S5)	0.91	Na	na	na	0.88	na	na	na
Service and facilities in Malaysia (S13)	0.61	Na	na	na	0.54	na	na	na
Cultural festival events	na	0.75	0.61	0.76	na	0.76	0.62	0.77
Festive events in Malaysia (S8)	0.76	Na	na	na	0.86	na	na	na
Culture heritage in Malaysia (S9)	0.80	Na	na	na	0.71	na	na	na

Note: CR=Composite Reliability, AVE=Average Variance Extracted

Table 4: Psychometric Properties of the Destination Loyalty Measurement Model for First-time and Repeat-visit Tourists

Items	First-time Tourist				Repeat-visit Tourist			
	Factor				Factor			
	Loading	α	AVE	CR	Loading	α	AVE	CR
Destination Loyalty:	Na	0.93	0.83	0.94	na	0.86	0.68	0.87
Will say positive things about Malaysia to other people. (L1)	0.81	na	na	na	0.79	na	na	na
Will suggest Malaysia to your friends and relatives as a vacation destination to visit. (L2)	1.00	na	na	na	na	na	na	na
Will encourage friends and relatives to visit Malaysia. (L3)	0.92	na	na	na	0.86	na	na	na
Will consider Malaysia as your choice to visit in the future. (L4)	Na	na	na	na	0.75	na	na	na

Note: CR=Composite Reliability, AVE=Average Variance Extracted

Table 5: Discriminant Validity - First-time Tourist

Factor	Destination Image	Accessibilities and Facilities	Cultural Festival Events	Destination Loyalty
Destination Image (D)	0.73			
Facilities and accessibilities (SF2)	0.29	0.77		
Cultural festival events (SF3)	0.48	0.30	0.78	
Destination Loyalty (L)	0.56	0.40	0.35	0.91

Table 6: Discriminant Validity - Repeat-visit Tourists

Construct/Factor	Destination Image	Accessibilities and Facilities	Culture Festival Events	Destination Loyalty
Destination Image (D)	0.76			
Facilities and accessibilities (SF2)	0.49	0.72		
Cultural festival events (SF3)	0.38	0.43	0.79	
Destination Loyalty (L)	0.67	0.49	0.38	0.83

Table 7: Model Goodness-of-fit Indexes

Indices	Value		Level of acceptance (Zainudin, 2014)
	First-time tourist	Repeat tourist	
ChiSq/df	1.65	1.54	< 5
GFI	0.92	0.91	≥ 0.90
CFI	0.97	0.95	≥ 0.90
TLI	0.96	0.94	≥ 0.90
RMSEA	0.07	0.07	< 0.08

Table 8: Standardized Direct and Indirect Effects - Two Tailed Significance (BC) for First-time Tourist

Indirect Effect					
Direct effect				Lower bound	Upper bound
	Destination Image (D)	Satisfaction (S)	Destination image (D)		
Satisfaction (S)	0.001	...	Destination loyalty (L)	0.011	0.084
Destination loyalty (L)	0.953	0.017			3.828

Table 9: Standardized Direct and Indirect Effects - Two Tailed Significance (BC) for Repeat-visit tourists

Indirect Effect					
Direct effect				Lower bound	Upper bound
	Destination Image (D)	Satisfaction (S)	Destination image (D)		
Satisfaction (S)	0.005	...	Destination loyalty (L)	0.002	0.138
Destination loyalty (L)	0.410	0.005			2.613

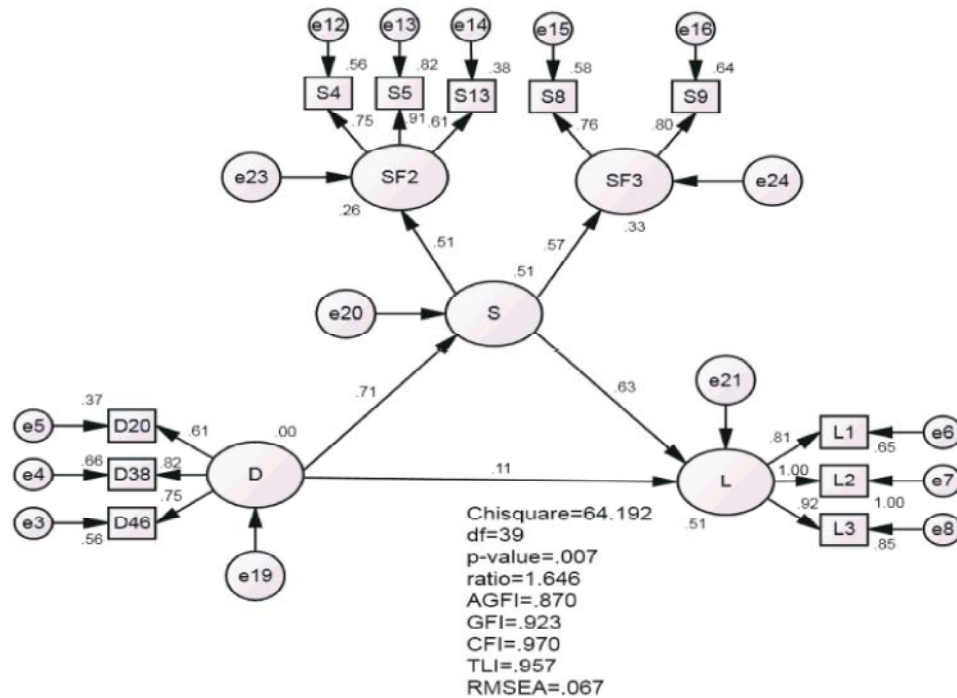


Fig. 1: First-time Tourist Structural Model

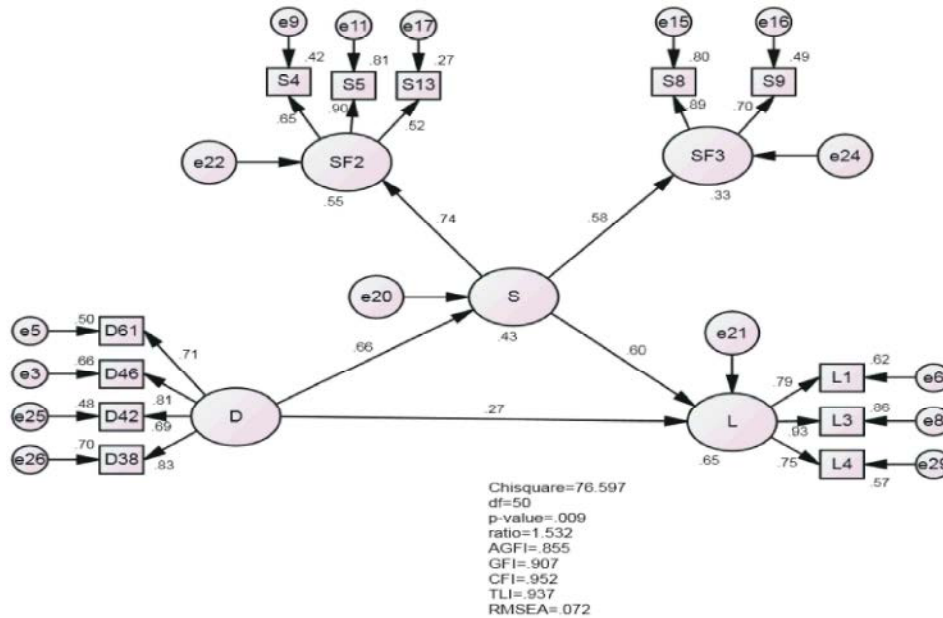


Fig. 2: Repeat-visit Tourist Structural Model

Malaysia. Moreover, the first-visit tourists would suggest Malaysia to their friends and relatives as a vacation destination to visit. The above findings also uncover that although first-visit tourists are satisfied with their travel experience they are less likely to make repeat visits. However, most importantly, results confirmed that the repeat-visit tourists seem to be more likely than first-visit

tourists to choose Malaysia as a travel destination for their future holiday. Results of the independent t-test ($t=4.50$, $p=0.01$) suggest that there is a significant difference in destination loyalty between the first-time tourists ($M=5.67$, $S.D.=0.82$) and repeat-visit tourists ($M=6.14$, $S.D.=0.79$). Obviously, repeat-visit tourist attained higher level of destination loyalty.

The Mediating Role of Tourist Satisfaction on the Relationship Between Destination Image and Destination Loyalty: Figure 1 and Figure 2 illustrate the structural model that depicted the inter relationships among constructs under study. Table 8 and Table 9 contain two-tailed significant level for standardized direct and indirect effects of destination image on destination loyalty for first-time and repeat-visit tourists respectively. Results in Table 8 suggest that the indirect effect of destination image on destination loyalty is significant $p=0.011$ (95% CI: 0.084 – 3.828). Similarly, results in Table 9 illustrate that the indirect effect of destination image on destination loyalty is significant $p=0.002$ (95% CI: 0.138 – 2.613). The findings suggest that the null hypothesis that there is no mediating effect is rejected. Thus, in this case, tourist satisfaction had a full mediating role on the relationship between destination image and destination loyalty for both groups of tourists.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study uncovers that the majority of the respondents were first-visit tourists, especially those from Western Europe (Netherland, Germany, France, Switzerland, Belgium, Austria and Holland). Both groups of tourists were young adults, representing both genders and their trip to Malaysia was to spend their holidays. It appears that more efforts should be undertaken to encourage repeat-visits among Western European countries. The study also suggests that tourist satisfaction plays an important full mediating role on the relationship between destination image and destination loyalty. It is empirically proven that destination image has no direct effect on destination loyalty, however it has an indirect effect through tourist satisfaction. Thus, destination brand image influences tourist satisfaction, which in turn influences destination loyalty of European tourists. This finding parallel with other research studies conducted by [36, 50] where destination image has no effect on destination loyalty and tourist satisfaction fully mediates the relationship between destination image and destination loyalty.

Against this background, it is important to secure tourist satisfaction by providing attributes that could influence their travel experience visiting Malaysia such as aspects related to “facilities and accessibilities” and “cultural festival events”. The specific attributes of “facilities and accessibilities” include modern transportation facilities making moving around in Malaysia convenient, accompanied with other tourism

services and facilities such as good accommodation and communication. The “cultural festival events” aspect refers to the festival events organised displaying the different unique cultural heritages comprising Malay, Chinese, India and other different ethnic groups of people inhabiting Malaysia. These cultural festival events throughout the whole year, usually in conjunction with major festive holidays in Malaysia, for example national day, Hari Raya Aidilfitri, Chinese New Year, Thaipusam, Deepavali, Wesak day, Kaamatan Harvest Festival and Gawai festival. These specific attributes of a destination would influence the overall tourist satisfaction. Therefore, the move of Tourism Malaysia to organise the Malaysia Year of Festival 2015 aimed to highlight the various festivals and cultures of Malaysia is the right move to sustain tourists’ satisfaction when visiting Malaysia.

The study also uncovers that satisfaction with a particular destination appears to be a necessary condition for explaining repeat visitations among repeat-visit tourists. In addition, other researchers such as [51, 4, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57] indicated that tourist satisfaction influenced destination loyalty by spreading word-of-mouth and encourage a revisit of Malaysia in the future.

However, the findings of the study also revealed that, although the first-visit tourists were satisfied with their travel experience, it was not sufficient for them to make repeat visits. The finding is consistent with the work of Gitelson and Crompton [58] that suggested satisfied tourists might not return to the same destination because they prefer to discover other places, seeking variety and new travel experiences, in their next or future holiday outings. Probably, there are other reasons that inhibited them from returning to the same travel destination such as age, time or money factors. The first-time tourists display attitudinal loyalty. Destination loyalty is not only manifested by the tourist intention to make repeat visit in the future but could be observed through their attitudinal loyalty to engage in saying positive things about Malaysia to other people and encourage friends and relatives to visit Malaysia.

In contrast, the same phenomenon does not seem to apply for the repeat-visit tourists who indicated that they would make repeat-visits. Most likely they discovered that there are many other interesting places to visit in Malaysia. Moreover, they are most likely to engage in saying positive things about Malaysia to other people and encourage friends and relatives to visit Malaysia. Repeat-visit tourists display both behavioural and attitudinal loyalty. In addition, there is a significant level

of loyalty difference between the two groups where first-visit tourist attained lower loyalty than the repeat-visit tourists. The focus is more on improving behavioural loyalty among first-time tourist. This could be achieved by perhaps focusing on improving the benefit sought by this group that is providing an adventurous holiday. Thus, more efforts should be put in place in promoting the image of Malaysia as offering a real adventure holiday with the chance to see wild life in their natural habitat and offering a lot in term of natural scenic beauty.

The results of this study should be read with caution in light of its several limitations. First, like any studies conducted using a cross-sectional descriptive research design, this study only captured a “snapshot” of a population and was carried out for that particular period of time. Thus findings were limited to this group of tourists. Future research should consider including different groups of tourists travelling in different seasons to cater for the different group of people travelling throughout the year as they may have different image perceptions. Second limitation is related to the location of collecting data. The data was collected from European tourists departing from the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) and Lower Cost Carrier Terminal (LCCT) and excluded other tourists departing from other international airports. Therefore, the result from the study should not be generalized beyond this population. In order to increase the generalization of these findings, it is essential for future studies to replicate similar studies by collecting data from other Malaysian international airports. Thirdly, the study proposed one independent variable (destination image), mediating variable (tourist satisfaction) and destination loyalty (dependent variable). As there may be other factors that could influence tourist satisfaction, future research should consider including them, such as perceived value and service quality. In addition, studying tourist motivation factor visiting a destination could provide more insights to the findings of this study. This is an approach to address the psychological needs and wants of tourists, which are related to why people travel and what they want to enjoy. Taking into consideration the above recommendations, future research probably would give more insightful managerial implications to destination marketers.

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